

THROW THEM IN THE POTOMAC



My cousin was a slave beaten to death by Egyptian taskmasters. His name was Ben Sherman Goldman, a son of Israel & Pessie Portugal Goldman, a grandson of Haim Eliezer & Liba Bluma Goldman.

God is essential to the story of our slavery and Exodus from Egypt. This idea has to be kept in mind so what comes next will not be mistaken for a secularist revision. Rather, what follows is presented as a normative rabbinic understanding.

I read the story as history. It is an account of something that in fact actually happened. If you had a camera, you could have filmed it. It is told in a Biblical Epic style, and has to be appreciated on that basis. If it had been a CNN report, it might have included a six-second sound bite from Aaron, and maybe one from Pharaoh. Had it been in the *New York Times*, it would have been six or eight one-column stories on page six that did not mention the ethnicity of the particular slave group involved. The Bible itself provides two markedly different accounts of the Deborah Story in chapters 4 and 5 of Judges – one a narrative and one a poem. Were the Exodus a film made today, it might star Charlton Heston as Moses and Patrick Stewart as Pharaoh.

The miracles and wonders in the story are extraordinary cases of “every-day miracles,” *nisim she-bekhol yom*, to use the language of the *siddur*. Some of our great sages believed that the miracles in the episode, such as the plagues and the parting of the sea, were events that did not defy the

laws of nature. Rather, they were “amazing” in their timing and surprising in their precise manner of occurrence. The [Vikings victory over the Saints](#) (14 January 2018) was widely described as a “miracle” though we do not believe any laws of physics (or of football) were violated. It seemed highly unlikely to occur, but it did anyway. The video replay has been viewed a billion times. Had the Minnesota team won its subsequent game, a statue of Odin would have been erected in the state capitol.

In the epic language of Exodus, the plagues represent real things that can, and did, occur. Remarkably, they seemed to transpire at the command of Moses and Aaron. The plague of darkness – palpable darkness – could be a dust storm, a shared bout of major depression, or as midrash has it, a “dark” period during which collaborators “disappeared.” The latter would be an expected part of a social revolution. Even the tenth plague, the “killing of the firstborn,” was understood as something that can, and does, take place, as a sociological or political phenomenon (see the explanation of this phrase and of Ps. 136 in *Pesiqta deRav Kahana*).

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Mitsrayim. Even as slaves, we enjoyed Hebrew privilege, living in suburban Goshen, with our own flocks, homes and crops. Accounts of slavery in America mostly sound worse than what we experienced in the Land of the Pharaohs. Don’t get carried away with

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Slaves

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the Exodus story: We did not liberate Egypt; we liberated ourselves. But the thought has always been that others can follow our lead if we are successful, that we can hope to be a “light unto the nations.”

We were slaves for many generations, but then things changed. The government cut the budget for medical care for infants and children, with the inevitable result of greater infant mortality and debility. The babies were, in effect, thrown into the Nile (Ex. 1:22). The share of production taken by the ruling class – the top 0.1% of Egypt – was raised, meaning more work from the masses, who now had to extract their

own raw materials and manufacture the bricks (Ex. 1:11, 5:6ff). Eventually, Pharaoh proposed splitting up Hebrew families (Ex. 10:7-11) by deporting some family members and retaining others. While these stories are obviously fantastical Biblical yarns that could



never occur in modern times to real people, the Torah for some *reason* calls our attention to them.

That reason is that if the Torah is to be of value beyond entertainment, we best read the Exodus as an account of events that really took place, and take to heart the directive of Rabban Gamliel (Talmud Pesachim 116b) popularized in the Hagada of Pesah, that “in each generation we should see ourselves (or show ourselves) as though we personally had exited Egypt.” It doesn’t matter how great your Torah is; what matters is what you do with it.

My cousin Ben Sherman (Binyamin Shimon) Goldman was a cap maker in Minneapolis. He was beaten to death when he was 23 years old, and died in September 1922. At that time, 600,000 workers were on strike nation-wide, including 8,000 in St. Paul and another 8,000 in Minneapolis. The strike seems a minor episode in retrospect, not one of

the great labor battles acclaimed in song and story, and Ben’s death was not even reported in the newspapers. He is not mentioned by name in the Torah.

The police officer who beat him was merely enforcing the law. Strikes were illegal. A picket line prevented people from working – what could be more immoral than keeping an eager worker (“scab”) from a job someone else didn’t want, depriving that worker of his right to work? Picketing was considered criminal extortion, seeking money (a livable wage), or safety measures or other benefits, from factory owners, by force and threat of withholding labor, by blocking shipments and implicitly threatening hooliganism. If such extortion were permitted, the social order would collapse. If a worker thought the factory unsafe, he was welcome to quit. There were no

walls or barbed-wire fences surrounding Egypt.

The municipal police (“cops”) and private security guards (“thugs”) hired by business owners were paid to uphold the rule of law and defend property rights, necessary for the prosperity of all. To insure the ability of

laborers to work, and to protect the right of owners to set the terms of employment and protect their means of production, Ben Sherman was beaten, along with others, on the picket line. He died a few days later, from internal injuries exhibiting as bleeding from multiple orifices. No one was charged or punished for this incident. He was a grandson of my children’s great-great-grandparents, just another Hebrew who died in slavery.

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאלו הוא יצא ממצרים שנאמר
והגדת ל'בנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים.

Rabban Gamliel taught: In each generation, one should view [or show] oneself as having personally exited Egypt, as Scripture says, “You shall tell your progeny on that day, ‘for this purpose God took action for me when I left Egypt.’”

